

THESPIAN TALENT AND DRAMATIC PERFORMANCE IN SHAKESPEAREAN ERA: AN OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Art and Literature can grow and prosper only in an atmosphere of peace, order and prosperity and the Elizabethan Age assured all the three requisites. It was an age when trade and commerce of the country were revolutionized. People were overjoyed to avail such unprecedented and undreamt of comforts and luxuries. It was during this period that the master craftsman William Shakespeare gave his imagination a literary shape by gifting the nation more than thirty eight great classics of such a universal repute that even after centuries of his departure from this beautiful planet of ours, he keeps on engaging the minds and attention of the avid readers of his drama. His plays still hold the boards and banners, not only in English speaking countries, but throughout the globe on stages that the great bard would have never dreamt of during his lifetime. No dramatist can create live characters save by bequeathing the best of himself into his work of art, scattering among them a largesse of his own qualities, his own wit, his comprehensive cogent philosophy, his own rhythm of action and the simplicity or complexity of his own nature.

KEYWORDS: Audience, Boisterous, Fantasy, Music, Performance & Spectators

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INTRODUCTION

Art and Literature can grow and prosper only in an atmosphere of peace, order and prosperity and the Elizabethan Age assured all the three requisites. It was an age when trade and commerce of the country were revolutionized. People were overjoyed to avail such unprecedented and undreamt of comforts and luxuries. With all these favorable conditions, a vogue of classical studies and scholarship prevailed throughout England and in no time, England was turned into a vernal grove of melodious singing birds. It was during this period that the master craftsman William Shakespeare gave his imagination a literary shape by gifting the nation more than thirty-eight great classics of such a universal repute that even after centuries of his departure from this beautiful planet of ours, he keeps on engaging the minds and attention of the avid readers of his drama.

Shakespearean drama is like an over-flowing river of life and beauty, and all those who thirst for art or truth can have their fill from it. His masterpieces have been translated into more languages than any other book in the world except the Bible. He is unique in his power to reveal the secret places of our souls in phrase after phrase of almost miraculous insight. His plays still hold the boards and banners, not only in English speaking countries, but throughout the globe on stages that the great bard would have never dreamt of during his lifetime. More than this, they are still a household treasure to thousands who never saw a Shakespearean performance on the stage. No dramatist can create live characters save by bequeathing the best of himself into his work of art, scattering among them a largesse of his own qualities, his own wit, his comprehensive cogent philosophy, his own rhythm of action and the simplicity or complexity

of his own nature. Shakespeare's plays are replete with topical allusions and references to contemporary events. All his historical plays reflect Shakespeare's love for his country and love for its history. It was Shakespeare who could pierce the heart with too many passions, could realise the actual play of life, without falling in bondage to any power. There is no moral philosophy or conduct of life that he has not touched upon, no mystery that he has not probed. His delight in human character, his quick and penetrating sympathy with almost every variety of man, saved him from any persistent injustice towards the world. The creator of *Hamlet*, of *Lear*, of *Timon* saw clearly, and felt deeply, that there is also a darker side to the world and to the soul of man.

Shakespeare's was the glorious age when Queen Elizabeth I ruled England. The Queen loved the art of theatre and enjoyed watching performances. She helped theatres become popular in the cities. The fact is that Elizabethan theatre progressed from the Elizabethan era and it was during her reign that Shakespeare prospered. It is from this period that modern day society has its foundation for the Entertainment Industry. It is during Shakespeare's time that the writers and the actors began to rise into a higher social class and were finally acknowledged by the people for their works and their ability to entertain. Under the reign of Queen Elizabeth, the English Empire was considerably expanded, the church was unified, and language, literature, and theatre flourished to a great extent. When Shakespeare shifted to London he, first of all, worked as a stage actor, and then, he used to do a little bit of retouching of the old English plays and during this period, the great bard got the opportunity of studying not only defects of his other contemporary dramatists but also the exact requirements of the stage. Being an actor and a playwright, Shakespeare knew well what his audience wanted to see.

Theatre is the most collaborate art in which different actors work together harmoniously in order to portray a certain idea, concept, or a piece of art. It deals with various forms of emotions and is most commonly expected to leave a trace of sentiments on the audience. It is considered to be an energy because it is a calculated act from beginning to end. Moreover every theatrical piece has a predestined conclusion. Implying that the audience is most often aware of what will happen at the end of the play, yet the art of theatre is to keep them focussed and interested until the very end. A play without audience and actors is inconceivable. Therefore a dramatist has to adapt his plays to the conditions of the theatre and stage on which they have to be performed, to the actors who are to act them and to the audience who are to witness them. Shakespeare's dramas, accordingly, were greatly influenced by the conditions of the Elizabethan stage. Among Shakespeare's audience, were the lords and the courtiers, shopkeepers, tanners, butchers, workers, students and apprentices from all sections of London life. They were often noisy and unruly, but in the mass, they had a vigour and variety of taste. During the plays spectators wouldn't sit and watch; they would talk, eat and drink. They cheered at the parts they liked and booed at the parts they didn't like. When the actors were on the extended part of the stage, they were in a way in the middle of the audience, like performers in a circus show. Although the actors sometimes complained of the rough treatment they received from them, but their art was in the long run benefitted and disciplined by huge variety of appetite of the audience they had to satisfy. Crowded into the tiny playhouse, close enough to the actors to be able to touch them, Shakespeare's audience roared their delight when they were pleased during the performance of their favourite actors and quickly showed their disapproval when they were not. Elizabethan Drama declined from the day when it no longer served the audience drawn from all sections of nation's life. Ben Jonson commented on the diversity of playgoers in his verses praising Fletcher's *The Faithful Shepherdess* :

The wise and many headed bench

That sits upon the life and death of plays, is

composed of gamester, captain, knight, knight's man

Lady or pucelle, that wears mask or fan,

Velvet or taffeta cap, rank'd in the dark,

With the shop's foreman, or some such brave spark,

That may judge for his sixpence.

(Ben Jonson, Underwood).

Shakespeare's audience was far more boisterous than are patrons of the theatre today. They were loud and hot-tempered and as interested in the happenings offstage as on. The nasty hecklers and gangs riffraff would come from seedy parts in and around London like Tower-hill and Limehouse and Shakespeare made sure to point them out :

These are the youths that thunder at a playhouse, and fight for bitten apples, that no audience, but the Tribulation of Tower-hill, or the Limbs of

Limehouse, their dear brothers, are able to endure. (Henry VIII, 5.4. 65-8)

Spectators during the show, liked to drink wine or ale and snacks as they watched the plays. A number of Shakespeare's later plays were created keeping in mind his company's players, the Lord Chamberlain's Men. Such players as the tragedian Richard Burbage and clowns like William Kemp influenced the roles within Shakespeare's plays.

In the play *Hamlet*, no opportunity is missed to exploit the potential of a theatrical situation by the dramatist : eight deaths, the play-within-play, the fencing match, the grave-yard scene, the duel between Laertes and Hamlet and numerous high pitched rhetorical speeches including Hamlet's own soliloquies : The humanity's histrionic predilection has never before or since and nowhere else been put on show in a theatre in such exciting terms as in *Hamlet*. After Hamlet hears one of the actors deliver a speech on the stage, he reflects :

Is it not monstrous that this player here

But in fiction, in a dream of passion,

could force his soul so to his own conceit

That from her working all his visage Wanned

Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,

A broken voice,...

Had he the motive and the cue for passion

That I have? He would drown the stage with tears.

And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,

Make mad the guilty and appal the free,

confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed

The very faculties of eyes and ears,...

Theatre, in fact, is a challenge to our mind, for it makes us think and allows us to use our imagination. The mind plays a vital role in theatre, for the art lies within our imagination. Our mind stimulates many different types of strong emotions which make us feel joy, hatred, love, pain, and anger. These intangible feelings created by our mind make the theatre the most noteworthy art of life. During a theatrical act, we are projected into a world of fantasy and illusion and this is the reason that theatre is *neither a book nor a work, but an energy, and in this sense, it is the only art of life*.

During the performances of the plays, the imagination was compelled to play its part when one episode was followed on the same stage by another supposed to happen at a totally different place. Thus the dramatist depended largely upon the imagination and the quickness of apprehension of his audience. The stage scenery, for example, had to be kept very simple with just painted curtains, a table, a chair, a grave, a bed, a throne, a cardboard to indicate a mountain, and may be a tree to symbolize a forest. What the theatre today can show to its audience with massive scenery and electric lighting, Elizabethan playgoers had to imagine. In order to acquaint the public about the location of the scene, placards bearing the name of the locality were used. For instance, a placard bearing the words "Forest of Arden" was enough for the audience to imagine the whole scene. Brandes George rightly remarks in this connection : *If only a placard were hung on one door of the stage bearing in large letters, the name of Paris or of Venice, the spectators were at once transported to France or Italy. If an actor made a movement as though he was plucking a flower, the scene was at once understood to be a garden. If an actor spoke as though he were standing on a ship's deck in a heavy sea, the convention was at once accepted*. Not having a lighting technician to work the control panels like today, Shakespeare, during his times, had to indicate whether it was dawn or nightfall by using a speech rich in descriptive details. Many times there were sound effects such as gunpowder explosions and the beating of a pan to simulate thunder. Mostly in these open to the sky theatres, actors had to speak loudly over audience's noise, who were seated around three sides of the stage as they had to perform to each side. Each of the plays used to be played three or four times in one season, while each of the players had to play various roles. They were expected to memorize hundreds of lines at a time. While one play could be performing actors would be practicing lines for their next show.

Shakespeare believed that music played a key role in creating a 'dramatic force' in his plays and hence it came to be played for an hour or so before the show began, and to keep up the spirits of the audience, it was the custom to introduce songs and dances between the Acts. Towards the back of the main stage, there was also a part that could be curtained off and so separated from the front part of the stage. Here was the curtain through which the actors peeped at the audience before the play began, and which the groundlings threw apples and others missiles to hasten their coming or express their disapproval of them. Behind the stage were doors for exits and entrances and a curtained alcove useful for actors to hide inside. Above the stage was a higher acting area which symbolized a porch which proved useful in the performance of the plays like *Romeo and Juliet*, when Romeo stood below Juliet and told her how he loved her or Henry V scaled the battlements of Harfleur. In the stage floor, there used to be a trap door which was said to lead to "hell", especially useful for ghosts or devils who had to appear and disappear throughout the play. Acting in Renaissance England was an exclusively male profession and hence all the female parts used to be played by boys and by those young men who had not developed any hair on their chins. The theatre was far too rough a place for decent women and very few women went to see the performance in the theatre. The performance of a comedy was indicated by covering the stage with blue hangings, while in the case of a tragedy, it was covered with black hangings. The opening of the performance of any play was indicated by the unfurling of a flag on the rooftop of the theatre. This unfurling of the flag was accompanied by the flourish of trumpets and then came the Prologue, spoken by an actor wearing the long black gown. Audience had their own

favorite performers, looked forward to hearing music with the productions, and relished the luxurious costumes of the leading characters. Actors usually did not aim for historically accurate costumes. Instead, they typically wore gorgeous modern dresses, especially for the leading roles. Their costumes provided the essential “spectacle” of the plays and were often second-hand clothes once owned and worn by real-life nobles.

The design of an Elizabethan theatre was entirely different from the sort of thing we see today. The performance of the dramatized gospel stories within the church was the beginning of the theatre in England. Later on, the performance was shifted to the churchyard, but as some of the spectators, who used to sit on the ground, defiled the church graveyard, the stage had to be shifted further into some green or open space inn-yard in the vicinity of the town. It was not before the year 1576 that three of the regular theatres were set up in London, two of which were built in Shoreditch fields, while the third one was constructed in Black Friars. It was a time when the plays had to be performed, weather permitting, in the afternoon because it provided the best amount of light for the show on the bare stages of Shakespeare’s day. By the early 1600s, there were several playhouses just outside the city of London. The Elizabethans loved to see the plays enacted on the stage and this is evident from the fact that in 1633 there were as many as nineteen theatres in the city of London alone. They were of two types, open-air amphitheaters which were polygonal and Indoor Halls having a rectangular shape. The most prominent among them were *Blackfriars* (1576), *Theatre* (1576), *Curtain* (1577), *The Rose* (1587), *The Swan* (1595), *The Globe Theatre* (1599,) *Fortune* (1600) and *Hope* (1613).

The stage of some of these theatres projected into the central yard and the audience either sat immediately in front of the stage or in open-air theatres they stood around the stage in the yard, where places were the cheapest. In a way, the Elizabethan stage was like a platform viewed from both sides and not only from the front. Since actors were expected to be heard everywhere in the theatre, with no microphone and audience of more than 2000 people, so the projection of the stage was immensely important. Indoor for a penny more, they could also rent a cushion for the duration of the performance. Indoor theatres like the *Blackfriars* accommodated fewer people and cost more, with basic tickets starting at sixpence. Thomas Platter, a Swiss-born physician, and diarist visiting London from Basel, reports the cost of admission in his diary.

[There are] separate galleries and there one stands more comfortably and moreover can sit, but one pays more for it. Thus anyone who remains on the level standing pays only one English penny : but if he wants to sit, he is let in at a farther door, and there he gives another penny. If he desires to sit on a cushion in the most comfortable place of all, where he not only sees everything well, but can also be seen then he gives yet another English penny at another door. And in the pauses of the comedy, food and drink are carried round amongst the people and one can thus refresh himself at his own cost.

The Globe Theatre, also known as *Shakespeare’s Globe*, was not only the most important structure for Shakespeare’s dramatic career but also the pinnacle for the bustling environment with citizens in frenzy for entertainment. This was an unroofed building, circular in shape and constructed, mainly of wood. In his popular article *The Globe Theatre*, Lee Jamieson writes : *The Globe Theatre was an open-air theatre experience and therefore exposed to England’s awful weather.* This Globe Theatre was considered the most popular theatre of Elizabethan era because of its grand design, atmosphere and rich history. Shakespeare refers to *The Globe Theatre* in several of his plays, describing it in the opening passage of *Henry V* as “this wooden O.” Built outside the city itself on the south bank of the Thames river, *The Globe* was the theatre where Shakespeare’s most famous plays like *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Twelfth Night* were premiered. Andrew Gurr in his popular book *Rebuilding the Globe* describes the conditions of the average performances, at

least at the Globe, in some detail. Of the three thousand spectator capacity, Gurr writes about a thousand of them would have been those standing around in the yard. The rest would, of course, be seated on benches in the galleries. During the show there was no provision for a drop scene or front curtain. The change of scene was indicated by the walking out of all the players from the stage. Once the show started, it would go on until the end because there were no intervals and vendors circulated the audience with food and beverages. In an Upper Box was the orchestra of the Globe theatre, the largest in London, composed of the performers with different instruments. This was the only theatre which held people from all over the world to watch Shakespeare, his actors and his excellent stagecraft. The miracle Shakespeare worked on his audience at the Globe was to make them forget the heat of the summer sun scorching down on the crowded theatre and the air heavy with the smells of London and the sweat of unwashed spectators in the theatre. It is often mentioned in the passing that Shakespeare himself appeared as an actor on the Globe's stage. Shakespeare's name appears in the cast lists of plays written by himself and by other Elizabethan authors but there is no indication of the roles that he played. Tradition ascribes two parts to Shakespeare himself, that of the Ghost of Hamlet's Father in *Hamlet* and that of Adam, the loyal, aged servant in *As You Like It*.

Known for its structure, audience, and history, *The Globe* burned to the ground on June 29, 1613, during a performance of Shakespeare's last history play *Henry VIII* when a canon was fired to signal an important scene of the play. Within minutes the entire theatre was consumed in flames. But, amazingly, not even a single person was killed by the fire. Shakespeare describes in a sonnet about the fire that destroyed *The Globe* Theatre :

*This tearful fire began above,
A Wonder strange and true,
And to the stage house did remove,
As round as tailor's clew;
And burned down both beam and snag,
And did not spare the silken flag.
O sorrow, pitiful sorrow, and yet all this is true.
Out run the knights, out run the lords,
And there was great ado;
Some lost their hats and some their swords,
Then out run Burbage too;...*

The second Globe Theatre, which was rebuilt to be the most expensive and complicated in England ever built, was completed before Shakespeare's death in 1616. Today, it is not a tombstone for Shakespeare, for he never died and his plays lived on and on. It is more of salute to one of the greatest playwright in the history of Elizabethan drama.

CONCLUSIONS

Drawing to a close, it can only be concluded that Elizabethan theatre developed and gained its ground from the Elizabethan Era and it was during her reign that the master craftsman Shakespeare thrived and flourished. Actors and stage

artists of Shakespearean era faced multiple problems during their dramatic performance but they never lost heart or languished. Unlike today's theatrical performance, the great bard gallantly faced several hurdles and snags enacting shows in his times and ultimately proved his worth and came out victorious despite several obstacles. It is quite strange how, against all odds, the artists performed miracles while showing their thespian talent during the Elizabethan age-the golden era of Shakespearean drama.

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